New-type urbanisation and regional spatial structures—A case study

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Abstract. This paper mainly used a qualitative approach, including the case studies and comparative study, to investigate the evolutions of the regional spatial structures that will appear in the context of new-type urbanisation practices in China (National New-type Urbanisation Plan, NNUP), based on the investigation of two well-known municipalities, Chongqing and Shenzhen. The term ‘regional spatial structures’, in this paper, refer to the higher-level urban systematic spatial structures, in other words, the structures of city system. A city system generally has various forms of sub-settlements appeared within it. In this essay, the regional spatial structure of the city system was studied in details in which emphasis is put upon the planning of the city system, (which includes the formation of developmental units, like the districts, city clusters and developmental corridors), the formation of management methods and the inter-associations between the different units of settlements. Moreover, the regional spatial structures also constitute of the local income and market structures. With the above concepts, the paper demonstrates the current situations of NNUP in Chongqing and Shenzhen in terms of the management as well as the spatial developmental framework, and their respective effects on the regional spatial structures in the locality, and in turn draw a final conclusion, through making discussions towards the similarities and differences in their NNUP practices, that both cities are emphasising on the urbanisation practices towards the counties, while still having differences in terms of the extent to which the harmonised city system has been formed. Therefore, in the general NNUP context, efforts should continue to be made for the revitalisations of potential settlements, especially those with the strategic locations proximate to the municipal- or urban cluster-level central areas.

Keywords: new-type urbanisation, urbanisation of counties, regional spatial structure, spatial justice, land management, Shenzhen, Chongqing.

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid urbanisation with a national average rate of over 65%, mainly driven by the economic oriented urban expansion [1], the urban disease issues are increasingly prevalent in China. Under such an impetus for reform, various schemes of new-type urbanisation were introduced with the fundamental aim of converting the pattern of urbanisation in China ‘from quantity-based expansion to the quality-based upgrade’ [2]. For example, since 2014, the NNUP practice was initiated ever since 2014 as a central strategy guiding urbanisations. Generally, the new-type urbanisation methods advocate the sustainable urban design and emphasises the human-orientation in the urban design, planning and development.

Currently in the literature, there are extant research towards the effects of conventional urbanisation on the urban socio-spatial structures [2;3] and also the mechanism of new-type urbanisation and their comparisons with the conventional urbanisations [3;4]. However, the detailed mechanism regarding how the new-type urbanisation initiatives have changed or optimised the urban socio-spatial structures is lacking in the current research. Therefore, this paper mainly aims at help eliminating such a gap in the research, through investigating the effects of the new-type urbanisations on the regional spatial structures of two Chinese municipalities, and also attempt to discuss through making comparisons between the two municipalities’ cases, in terms of the differences appeared among these two municipalities in the effects of the NNUP reforms, and thus attempting to work out how the NNUP measures can be optimised in guiding the future urbanisations in the Chinese municipalities and metropolitans. The research mainly lays the foundations for the future studies.
through making primary research, analytics and discussions towards the general concepts and practical measures of the NNUP in the Chongqing and Shenzhen city system, though the research only focused on the aspect of spatial justice and county urbanisation as ultimate study focus.

The research framework for the rest of the sections include, the next part is used for literature review, which mainly illustrates the basic theoretical frameworks of the Chinese NNUP, whereas the next sub-section extends the basic theories and analytics into the real-life cases of Shenzhen and Chongqing, in which the local developmental intentions and structures were investigated. The third part consist of a fact analytics, by stating either qualitative or quantitatively the different categories of regional spatial structures that will be compared, like the management structures, market structures and income structures. Finally, in section 4, there is the final discussion relating to the similarities and differences between the evolutive processes of regional spatial structures in the context of NNUP.

2. Literature Review

This literature review is mainly divided into the following sections. The first part will explain the basic mechanism and typologies of the China’s new-type urbanisation practice. The next section will focus on the descriptions and comparisons of the new-type urbanisation practices in the two case study sites, Chongqing and Shenzhen respectively, and their resulting impacts on the spatial structures of the individual cities, as well as the higher-level spatial structures of the whole region, like the emergence of city clusters or developmental corridors through specific urbanisation practices.

2.1. Basic theory: New-type urbanisation

2.1.1 Risks brought by the conventional type urbanisations when the urban socio-spatial structures are evolving

Through the process of the dramatic urbanisations and the extensive urban development, various issues have appeared, which in general term is regarded as types of ‘urban disease’. [5] categorised this type of urbanisation as ‘aggressive urbanisation’ in which the urbanisation process is going on rapidly with the explicit risk of harming the future development in the urban areas. [5] has compared the urbanisation practices with the Sustainable Development Goals for demonstrating the current troubles brought by the dramatic trend of the urban sprawl.

In that article, the urban equality is investigated in details. For the equality issues, the article has mainly pointed out that the spontaneous and sporadic construction of informal settlements along the urban fringe have contributed to the urban expansion in an unorganised way. In addition, without the appropriate state supervision and aiding, these newly-urbanised households may still seek poverty.

2.1.2 Concepts of new-type remote urbanisations—explain through comparison

In the current era in China ever since the proposal of NNUP, the institution has changed their methods of intervening urbanisation activities from merely attempting urban sprawl to a one with wider scope for consideration. The key words in implementing the new-type urbanisation practices includes humanism, inclusivism, sustainability and harmonising [6].

The inclusivism called for the benefits sharing and reducing the inequality gaps. The humanism called for the guaranteeing of the legitimate rights of the urbanised individuals and households, including their access to houses and the basic social welfare services, which in China, through the granting of ‘Hukou’. The rise in the living standards will be accompanied by the increase in the purchasing power, which, in turn lead to the higher domestic demand. Such a rise in the aggregate demand together with the reduction in the income inequality gaps will enhance the quality of urbanisation and help the state to fulfil its two fundamental aims of implementing the new-type urbanisation practices, which include the actual economic growth in urban areas and the guarantee of the social stability [6].

In addition, the sustainability called for the prevention of the over-reclamation of the natural resources. The harmonising, on the other hand, has called for the organic integration of all those
guidelines [6]. Like the proposal of the policy frameworks that simultaneously promote the sustainability and the humanism, which reconciled the desires of protecting the rights of the individuals and the needs for environmental conservation. In this article, the concept of human-orientation and inclusivism will be investigated in details with the aid of real-life cases.

2.1.3 The improvements and reforms brought by the nearby urbanisations (urbanisations of counties)

It is an innovative, new-type urbanisation measure, calling for the efficient utilisation of the counties surrounding the urban areas [3] through providing employment opportunities, and thus reduce the pressure on the urban resources through sharing the inflowing population. Such a process is also closely associated with the rural revitalisation schemes in China. In addition, the continuance of living in their residence area will help the rural individuals to avoid the awkwardness or being overwhelmed after migrating to the city areas. This, in turn, fulfil their desires of achieving ‘complete urbanisation’ [3].

[5] has already informed those two main kinds of new-type urbanisation practices in its demonstration towards how should the institutions optimise the issue of urban inequality. It has mentioned the people-oriented investments towards the informal settlements, and also the necessities for the combination of two kinds of new-type urbanisations, described as the coordinated pace of urban investments and rural revitalisations. However, that article did not investigate the precise measures in which the investments can be made as well as the concordance for which the two kinds of new-type urbanisations can be simultaneously practiced. In which this will be further investigated in this paper, through the case analysis and their comparisons.

2.2. The regional spatial structure evolution and planning applied

Various developmental theories have been applied to explain the ways in which the two urban areas have achieved their new-type urbanism reforms. This part of the review mainly aims at illustrating those basic developmental theories, and combine them into the practical context of Shenzhen municipality. Generally, the Shenzhen developmental model featuring for highly polycentric status is able to be generalised to various kinds of urban settings, including Chongqing, given that most of the urban areas in the current eras of post-industrial revolution resemble a structure of mobile city, in which the city centre and services provisional hub no longer concentrate in the most central zones of the city, while are more likely to be spread out forming smaller ones outside the urban centres [7].

The mobile city spatial structure, when being investigated in the context of urbanisations, resembles a splintering urban structure [8], in which various sub-city centres, or satellite cities with minor influences to the surrounding are emerged in various parts of the city that locates proximate to the networked infrastructures. In addition, the emergence of satellite sub-centres in the fairly remote, suburban areas is also a representation of the counties’ urbanisations. In the Shenzhen context, such counties’ urbanisations and mobile city design are presented by the case of Overseas Chinese Town (OCT) as well as the Guangming new town [8]. The counties urbanisations are significant in regulating the urbanisation practices [8] so as to avoid the issues including spatial injustice or unbalanced regional growth.

Under the concept of satellite city development, the Matrix of Functions (MoF) included in the Spatial Development Framework (SDF) in the [9] should be applied for the identifications of functions and thus the rankings of the significance of different urban areas or sub-centres within a city cluster or within an urban area. The MoF will help the developers to identify the need for the development in different regions of the cluster or city and engage in a selective pattern of investment. Furthermore, with the knowledge of settlement ranking with regard to the amount and levels of functions available [9], the investor, especially in case of decentralised development management practices, will also be able to make related planning regarding the prioritisation of special functions development, and also be able to expect the ways in which the newly emerged urbanised county could be able to benefit from the synergistic effects with proxy to the high-rise functioning urban areas.
This will in turn help enhance the regional associations and remain a long-term cooperative regional development, instead of a competitive one. As also illustrated by [10], the different towns or counties may be likely to develop similar industries and providing similar services without the central identification of the functions of different settlements, which therefore engage in the intense regional competitions. Despite the productive efficiency among the individual industries, the lack of agglomeration within the settlements may in turn impair the general regional economic performances and leading to the unbalanced functional formation in the long-run.

3. Fact Analytics: The Chinese NNUP and the regional spatial patterns

The fact analytics can be roughly divided into two parts, for which the first include the parameters for comparing the urbanisation outcomes in Shenzhen and Chongqing, and the second part emphasis on analysing the ongoing processes of NNUP, including both the developmental framework and the further management technique. The investigation towards the urban management is initiated on the basis of general urban land usages.

3.1. The urbanisation rates

![Urbanisation rate of Shenzhen and Chongqing (2018-2022)](image)

**Figure 1.** The urbanisation rate of Shenzhen and Chongqing Data source: [11,12].

From the comparative figure above, it is clear that the Shenzhen urbanisation rate remained around 100% throughout the five years’ time, significantly surpassing that of Chongqing. Though demonstrating minor rises, the urbanisation rate in Chongqing is generally remains at around 70%. The urbanisation rate both surpassed the national average value: around 65.22%.

3.2. Urban governance

Chongqing, as a large municipality consisting of 38 districts and counties, are making frequent attempts with regard to the NNUP initiatives in the urbanisation processes. In details, with the primary aims of enhancing the role of towns and counties in the process of rapid urbanisations, or the so-called ‘urbanisations of counties’, the municipality is attempting to integrate and merge the counties proxy to the urban core areas as a city district, and further converting the towns in the surrounding areas of the counties into the sub-districts [13]. These combined processes have transformed the original rural-governed county and town areas into the direct administration of the urban areas, with
the opportunity to get involved into the general developmental planning of the core urban areas. The above switching in the management structures, on the other hand, demonstrate the highly flexible nature of the urban governance structures of Chongqing municipality [13].

Furthermore, with the same aim of human-orientation in the urban development, the local livelihoods are still greatly promoted, especially in terms of the autonomous economic performances in the newly-converted urban districts. A typical instance is the preservation of the markets in the newly-converted districts [13], in which the market towns are continued for their functions even if the counties have now been turned into part of core urban area development [13].

Apart from high flexibility and human-orientation, another key management structures in the Chongqing municipality is the general regulatory constraints from the higher-end administrative authority [13]. In the context of the NNUP in which the human-orientation is highly preserved together with related objectives including the sustainability and spatial justice. Despite the types of management structures that the region belongs to, including the town-level or municipality-level, all those local administrative institutions will face constraints under the context of central national strategy and developmental theory of sustainable and human-oriented urban constructions. For instance, as many town-ship level governments has reported, the constructions of the urban facilities and the conversion of the land usages cannot be done without the proper permissions from the related higher-level institutions, for the primary aim of preserving the agricultural lands from reclamation [13].

The urban governance in Shenzhen municipality in most of the cases resemble the normal form of construction in the other Chinese urban areas, in which the lands are transferred from the local government to the private sector developers for exploitation while the ownership rights of the lands are retained [14], and the land use rights cannot be derived without the granting from the regional institutions [14]. In such a context, the desires from the nation and the public can be considered properly before the actual land reclamation. For example, the guidelines included in the NNUP reform will be primarily considered before the land granting, which can therefore form regulatory constraints upon the land developers and forcing them to practice the land development in a publicly-welcomed way. If not, the lands, similar as the treatment in Chongqing, may be subject to retrieval and expropriations [14]. However, various facts also illustrate that Shenzhen can be different in terms of urban governance structures. For instance, with the aim of forming a ‘smart city’ in Shenzhen, the local institutions engage in urban optimisation strategy so as to enhance the sustainability of the urban functioning, which also enhances the living standard within the urban areas. To illustrate, with the Shenzhen Municipal New-Type Smart City Construction Master Plan proposed in 30 July, 2018 [15], the institutions will make attempt to improve the city in terms of the modernisation, internationalisation and innovations [15]. The promotion of those aspects in the urban functioning usually requires a high level of private sector involvement in the process of urban constructions and evolutions, which, in the Shenzhen context, forms a continuation of the original, private-predominated and foreign-oriented city constructions. For instance, in 2016 the city saw a 100% telecommunication coverage for the communities after the private firm Huawei has cooperated with the state-owned enterprise China Telecom [15] for the enhancement in the regional communications.

Therefore, though Shenzhen has largely conserved the national land ownership and management structures, certain differences in the urban land use and construction management compared with the other Chinese municipalities can be explained through the highly experimental nature in terms of governance of the urban areas, as well as the certain goals formed in the urban functioning, which are proposed with the pre-disposition of economic performance level in the urban area (For instance, the smart city in Shenzhen is constructed given that the city has already high levels of economic activities, and thus the transformation in the economic performances is needed so as to enhance the sustainability of the urban functioning).
3.3. The regional spatial developmental framework analysis of Chongqing and Shenzhen

Within the city system of the Chongqing and Shenzhen municipality, the developmental corridors and axis constructions remain to have high discrepancies, despite their shared aims of enhancing the regional associations by linking urban districts performing various types of functions through constructions of developmental corridors.

In the Chongqing model, the developmental corridors were originated from the Chengdu-Chongqing economic circle design. Though relating to other cities, the observations towards the amounts and locations of the areas connected by the developmental corridors can properly reflect the level of development and availabilities of related functions inside the urban areas. In the Chengdu-Chongqing economic circle design, the developmental axis is dispersed with various directions and also have high levels of variations in their sizes. The amount of developmental axis reached the peak between the two core urban regions of Chengdu and Chongqing [16], which is the central developmental circles within the two urban centres. Despite high intensity, the developmental axis between the two core areas are relatively small and mainly connect the minor districts in Chongqing. Some of these districts may be newly evolved from the precedent counties, like the Tongliang District [13;16], located within the central developmental circle, will be the most likely to receive the primary attention of the urban development.

The entire spatial developmental framework in Chongqing and Chengdu is bounded by the two major city corridors, in which the relatively large and major spatial developmental centres of the Chongqing municipalities and the Sichuan province were situated [16]. In addition, there are also minor city clusters developed proximate to the central ones were formed as part of the spatial developmental frameworks in the Chengdu-Chongqing city cluster, mainly for the aim of enhancing the role of those potential regional central areas where located relatively far from the central developmental corridors. These minor city clusters are formed in the areas where there are relatively large number of cities and towns concentrated in one certain region. In these regions, the role of the regional central cities is appreciated and their territorial influences in the locality facilitate the growth of the high-density city cluster.

However, despite the general features of the popularisation and synergistic development of the counties and towns, the number of counties that are actually involved into the developmental processes are limited. Only if located within the core developmental areas, or at least being proximate to those regions, the counties and towns may gain sufficient developmental opportunities. However, the majority of the counties and towns in Chongqing were not located within such a framework of the economic circle development, and thus make them not able to get connected to the economic circle, and withdraw the chance of achieving their county-level urbanisation with the synergistic development together with the regional central areas. From the diagram below, only three minor counties, which are Fengdu, Zhongxian and Yunyang respectively, were integrated into the urban corridor outside the main developmental circle, and only one county of Qianjiang, in which the functions related to tourism were strategically developed, was connected to the central developmental circle through an extension of one certain urban corridor.
Figure 2. Part of Chongqing spatial development framework: Chengdu-Chongqing economic circle [17]; With personal annotation

Figure 3. Shenzhen city system and spatial development framework; With personal annotation [18]

The regional spatial developmental framework in Shenzhen, on the other hand, is more regular with two horizontal axes combined with three vertical developmental axes, as illustrated in the above diagram [18]. With the various forms of urban development corridors under different hierarchical level (including municipal, district and cluster level hierarchy) being formed, the city is almost filled with urban clusters constituting of high density urbanised sub-centre areas, forming districts and consequently integrated to form the Shenzhen municipal. Hardly any regions being marginalised from comprehensive urban construction and engaging in individual growth. Further proved by the urbanisation rate of 99.81% in Shenzhen up to 2021 [12], the comprehensive urban development in the Shenzhen SEZ is formed due to the elimination of spatial boundaries of SEZ in all areas of Shenzhen at its 5th stage of spatial plan framework proposal in the year of 2010 [18]. Therefore, when
comparing with Chongqing, the spatial developmental framework in Shenzhen is more regular which thus fuel a higher and more general pace of upgrading in the urban system. The exact reasons for those differences will be further investigated in the discussion section.

4. Discussion: The comparisons between Chongqing and Shenzhen cases in their evolutions of the regional spatial structures in the context of NNUP

The above literature review and fact analytics emphasised predominantly the spatial pattern of regional development, including the city cluster and economic circle development in Chongqing and the decentralised spatial pattern in Shenzhen constituting of various satellite cities. The discussion part will extend this emphasis through making comparisons between the spatial development patterns of these two cities in the context of new-type urbanisations, focusing on the two aspects consistent with those observed in the fact analytics. Finally, the paper will attempt to suggest the possible spatial developmental directions or criterions that may be put on in the future eras of expansions and urbanisations in these two regions.

When discussing the general urbanisation developmental methods, the main similarity between the measures taken for NNUP among the two municipalities and their peripheral regions is the emergence of the county-level urbanisation, or more directly, the emergence of new urban areas. These developmental strategies include the emergence of satellite cities in Shenzhen, and the integration of the towns and counties into the direct management scope of the urban areas that is practiced by Chongqing. These processes can rectify the population influx which in turn exerting less pressure on the functioning of core metropolis, while also promote the strategic role of towns in the development of Chinese urban areas, especially in terms of enhancing the regional equality and spatial justice. Therefore, the similar processes of town and county-level urbanisation, or the nearby-urbanisation in the perspectives of local residents, facilitate the emergence of the poly-centric urban structures in both of the areas, in which the splintering pattern of urban development [9] are also emerged in both of the urban areas, with various new urban clusters and their relative centres constructed, circling or connecting the municipal-level urban central areas.

The more detailed developmental and management processes of urban areas are also highly similar across the regions. As previously analysed and compared, the urbanisation practices of both of the Shenzhen and Chongqing resembles each other in various ways. For example, with regard to the process of central, municipal-level institutions’ governance and constraining towards the urbanisation practices. In addition, the emphasis of urban development in each area has highly facilitated the growth of private and foreign-oriented urbanisation and city expansion measure. The smart-governance, including the reduction in the processes and costs of business set-up, are highly encouraged in both of the city regions, and thus also demonstrating high levels of similarity.

The differences across the NNUP practices in the two urban areas discussed in this paper is mainly related to the significant differences across the regional spatial structures within the two municipalities. This part of the discussion mainly aims at proposing the reasons and indications implications for the discrepancies in the developmental processes that shape those variations in the city system spatial frameworks. These significant variations may either due to the pre-dispositional factors, including the history of the urban area development, the appearance of minor nations in the urban locality, as well as the areas of lands that both the municipalities have. There may also be immediate factors that can change in a relatively flexible pattern, including the urban governance pattern that partially facilitates the emergence of certain spatial structures.

Typically, the history of development in the two municipalities will directly shape the differences in their current conditions of the regional spatial structures, such as with the extent of county-level urbanisations. The process of FTZ constructions in the two regions are believed to bring benefits to the county-level urbanisations as the FTZs are usually constructed outside the core urban areas while proximate to the major transport hubs. The launching of FTZs are likely to bring frequent updates to the economic performances in the locality by facilitating a quick rise in the levels of business
concentration and in turn form a county-based city sub-centre. The history of FTZ constructions in the two municipalities varied noticeably. For example, when Shenzhen started to be the first Chinese SEZ in the year of 1980, Chongqing was still under the administration of Sichuan province, until the year of 1997 when it was finally separated out from that region and turn itself into a municipality under direct national governance in the year of 1997. Furthermore, the Chongqing municipality started the promotion of FTZ until year of 2017, when the first Chongqing Free Trade Zone was developed in April [19]. Therefore, in terms of the historical processes of FTZ constructions, Shenzhen overtake Chongqing in a relatively apparent pattern, and thus has gained more opportunities for business launching and potential expanding to the surrounding regions.

Another variable that contribute to the potential discrepancies in the regional spatial layout of the two municipalities are related to the appearance of minor nations. These areas usually have gained a certain extent of sovereignty in terms of their administrations, and thus will not be integrated into the general urban planning of the municipality. For example, in Chongqing municipality, apart from the counties and urban districts, there are a total of four autonomous administrative county, namely Shizhu, Pengshui, Youyang and Xiushan from the north to the south [17], as the population in those areas are mainly constituted of minor nation people. All those autonomous management regions are located proxy to the central developmental axis of the Chengdu-Chongqing economic circle, while is excluded from the central development planning due to the autonomous nature of the management in these areas. Such situations, in turn, will impair their paces in achieving urbanisations. Therefore, for the potential urban sprawling and developmental corridors constructions, emphasis should also be put on those autonomous administrative zones with special nations, and thus avoid any possible marginalisation in the regional spatial development, especially when constructing the developmental corridors that aims to benefit large numbers of surrounding districts, towns and urban areas through the synergistic effects across the region. For example, in Chongqing, the extensions and involvement of those autonomous regions can be formed by connecting the regional developmental corridors from the central developmental circle into the autonomous regions, and thus enhance the connections between those minor nation regions and the rest parts of the city system. The private business may be able to influx the region when observing certain opportunities, and thus further optimising the relationship between the minor nation region and the rest of the city system.

5. Conclusions and future research implications

After investigating and comparing two new-type urbanisation reform practices, we have seen that the nearby urbanisation strategy can be long-lasting and will benefit a wider scope of stakeholders including the urban and rural societies and environments as well as the urbanised and left-behind individuals, such a wider-scope of benefits brought, together with the longer-lasting beneficial effects bringing to the locality, has made both two urban areas focusing on the poly-centric city development, involving the emergence of various sub-districts and urbanised towns and counties.

This paper mainly investigated (through proposing the reasons for discrepancies in the regional spatial structures in the two municipalities) the effects of the NNUP practices on the evolutions of regional spatial structures in both the Chongqing and Shenzhen context. In turn, the research found that Chongqing and Shenzhen have noticeable variations in terms of the intensities and coverages of the spatial developmental corridors and the urban clusters, which in turn shapes various forms of regional spatial structures. Generally, Shenzhen has a more optimised structure of the developmental corridor and urban cluster formation mainly because of its higher level of balancing in the spatial growth. While Chongqing is still on its way for the constructions of harmonised city system planning, with many regions being isolated from the strategic urban plan of economic circle formation. Various explanations towards the differences include the pre-dispositional factors, including the history of private- and foreign- oriented developments and the lack of participation in the general economic circle development of minor nation autonomous regions.
Despite the high levels of pre-dispositional factors determination, effective measures could be taken for reversing the current situations, mainly in the form of connecting those autonomous regions with the developmental circle through the corridors. These processes, in turn, will lead to a more optimised spatial development. In the context of NNUP initiatives from the nationwide, such a process should be continuously proposed so as to reach the final and most fundamental targets of the new-type urbanisations, which in this paper mainly includes the spatial justice as well as the urbanisations of counties.

For the future aspects when studying the city system development in these two regions, emphasis can be placed on the future processes by which the developmental corridors from the central developmental zones in Chongqing is extended to the minor nation regions as well as the other parts of the Chongqing municipality so as to bring forward a more inclusive measure of city system expansion. In addition, attention can be paid relating to the individual city system construction in Chongqing and also the interactions between the two city system construction frameworks. Another aspect that worth future study is the investigations towards how the Matrix of Functions can be applied in the context of the two city systems, so as to further facilitate the harmonised urban growth and a higher extent of spatial justice.

References


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